CHAPTER 4

THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER: REDEFINING OTHERNESS

The Optimist's Daughter echoes many familiar themes in The Robber Bridegroom and The Golden Apples. According to Kerr in "The World of Eudora Welty's Women", there are reenactments of family gatherings for important rituals and familiar portrayals of character types. The Optimist's Daughter and "The Wanderers" from The Golden Apples deal with the experience of a daughter witnessing the death of a parent while characters such as Clement, Rosamond and Salome of The Robber Bridegroom each have their parallels in The Optimist's Daughter (145). However, among all these obvious similarities, it is Clement Musgrove's vision that "all things are double", which is most crucially revived in Welty's final novel (Bryne 254). Like Clement Musgrove, Judge McKelva has married twice, once "happily" and once "unhappily". Clement's second wife, Salome, exemplifies the role of "wicked stepmother" while Judge McKelva's Wanda Fay carries the fairy tale tradition in her name. Randisi in A Tissue of Lies: Eudora Welty and the Southern Romance (1982) explains that "Wanda" refers to a magical "wand" or staff while "Fay" conjures the idea of an evil spirit or fairy from the underground world (127). According to Bryne, Clement's feeling that both his wives are somehow one is like Clint McKelva's dying "worn out with both wives - almost as if up to the last he had still had both of them" (151). In addition to these parallels, Laurel McKelva, the Judge's daughter, can be seen as Rosamond's counterpart. Like Rosamond she tries to reconcile the memory of her good, maternal mother with the presence of a wicked stepmother. Laurel is also like Virgie Rainey of The Golden Apples in that she struggles to reconcile the tensions between the monster and the domestic angel within herself. Hence, The Optimist's Daughter is very

much an extended discussion regarding the notion of female dichotomy and the integration of these polarities in Welty's heroines.

In the story, Laurel McKelva, an artist from Chicago returns to New Orleans to visit her ill and hospitalized father who has been diagnosed with a detached retina. Upon her arrival she discovers that he has married an insensitive, vicious and much younger woman. Repelled by his crude and self-centered wife, Laurel tries to find out what led her father to such an ill-matched marriage.

In her portrayal of Laurel's stepmother, Fay, Welty alludes to the idea of the diabolical woman: the monster, the witch and the wicked stepmother. Fay's tremendous attraction for the chaotic, carnival spirit of Mardi Gras and her insatiable desire for carnival revelry suggests the monstrous perversity that resides within her. Her affinity with the carnivalesque is reinforced by the fact that her birthday falls on the day of Mardi Gras, making her the daughter of vulgarity and depravity (Harrison 118). While the carnival in New Orleans gives Laurel alone the impression of "crowds running wild in the streets" (31) and the remembrance of "the unmistakable sound of hundreds [and] thousands [of] people blundering"(43), Fay finds her milieu in its chaos and disorder. Welty alludes to Fay's affiliation to Medusa within the setting of one of the carnival evenings: "Fay grabbed Laurel's arm as she would have grabbed any stranger's. [. . .] 'I saw a man and he was dressed up like a skeleton and his date was in a long white dress, with snakes for hair, holding up a bunch of lilies! Coming down the steps of that house like they're just starting out!' " (43).

The vision of the masquerading couple is significant since it is the first thing that attracts Fay's attention as they leave the hospital where Judge McKelva had died earlier

that day. According to Thornton in "Medusa-Perseus Symbolism in Eudora Welty's The Optimist's Daughter" (1985), the skeleton disguise and the allusion to the snake-haired gorgon serve as a reflection of the dead judge and his "monstrous" wife descending the steps just after their wedding. Several other incidents and attributes reminiscent of the gorgon are associated with Fay in the novel. For instance, when Judge McKelva goes to the eye clinic, Fay is "uptown in the beauty parlor, letting Myrtis roll up her hair" (4). The name Myrtis evokes the Latin "myrtus", the myrtle tree which is the sacred tree of Venus, goddess of beauty. This scene involving Fay's hair, the allusion to Venus and the suggestion of the vanity of beauty, recalls how the three legendary women-monsters were transformed from beautiful women into hideous gorgons by the Olympian gods as punishment for their vanity. Welty's description of Fay's pointed "golden buttons" on her dress also calls to mind the golden scales that cover Medusa's body (3). Later, as Judge McKelva lies bedridden, Fay acquires two pairs of "long green eardrops" tossed to her from a Carnival float and matching green shoes which she purchases (25). The green costume jewelry swinging from her ears resemble the snakes of Medusa's hair while the green shoes appear later in the story to remind the reader once again of the gorgon-like imagery associated with Fay (Thornton 66-67).

Fay is said to have left her family in Madrid, in order to make her living as a typist in Mount Salus. A mysterious wanderer and foreigner in a small town, Fay's presence arouses suspicion and disrupts Mount Salus's social order and its customs. Her speech, behavior and values continually clash with those upheld by the Mount Salus community, resulting in antagonistic feelings toward her among townsfolk. The women complain to Laurel that Fay never plays bridge or cooks. She has very little idea of how to separate an

egg and leaves the home in disarray. " 'Frying pan' was the one name she could give [. . .] of all the things in [the] kitchen" (107) and "[their] bed wasn't made" (106). "You got a peep at her origins," says Mrs. Pease (106). However, origins do not matter to Fay. She rejects her past, asserting, "[t]he past isn't a thing to me" (179) and lies to Laurel that her family is dead (27).

Fay is marginalized and consigned to the role of the Other by the female community of Mount Salus because of her foreign eccentricities. The women, conditioned to be subservient to patriarchal customs, scorn Fay's habits and differences since her ways transgress the proper communal behavior they were taught to expect from women. James Sharpe in Instruments of Darkness (1996) mentions how women who live outside conventional norms of society and household are perceived as being outside the normal patterns of control. Such women are anomalies in the patriarchal order and thus fit targets for hostility, a situation which eventually leads them to being accused as witches (172). Fay, with her foreign eccentricities and rejection of familial ties is inevitably perceived as the witch figure of Mount Salus. Her continual self-assertions and silly claims for attention are defensive acts to fight against a society that excludes and condemns her by word and deed. When she decides to go back to Texas with her family, she expresses her desire to "see somebody that can talk [her] language" (97).

Although women like Fay are sidelined as the Other, Welty transforms their peripheral position into a positive one by proclaiming its advantages rather than interpreting it as something to be transcended. The condition of Otherness enables women to stand back and criticize the norms, values and practices that dominant patriarchal culture seeks to impose on women, particularly those who choose to live on its periphery.

According to Manning, Mount Salus may consider Fay ill-mannered and foolish, but she displays an insightful understanding of the community's hypocritical stance toward her and others alike. She knows that under their masks of politeness and civility, there is contempt and disdain (178-79). When Laurel accuses her of lying about her family, she replies that the lie is "better than some lies [she's] heard" (99). In their disapproval of her family, she says, "at least my [family are] not hypocrites [. . .]. If they didn't want me, they'd tell me to my face" (99). Although Fay's behavior is anything but genteel, Welty does not corroborate the Mount Salites' belief of their town as a nurturing, harmonious community possessed of a benevolent social order. Rather, Welty presents ample evidence that the town is unjust and artificial in its social manners.

Fay's carnivalesque ways threaten the rigid order of the Mount Salus community who dislike any violation of societal boundaries and any form of change. According to Eichelberger in Prophets of Recognition: Ideology and the Individual in Novels by Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow and Eudora Welty (1999), Welty uses Fay as a tool to mock and criticize Mount Salus's sense of order, which is represented by Laurel's regard and demand for propriety (130, 136). Throughout the novel, Fay's carnival behavior during the judge's illness and death mocks Laurel's grief and her insistence that others act and "remember right" (102). Laurel is horrified when Fay joins the Dalzells in their merriment, undermining the seriousness of her father's illness: "It seemed to Laurel that in another moment the whole waiting room would dissolve itself in waiting-room laughter" (51). Fay's violent display of emotions and her lack of propriety are a comic parody of mourning that disrupts Laurel's desire for respect and propriety. She chooses "warm, foolish pink" satin for the lining of her husband's coffin, much to Laurel's disgust (62). At the cemetery

Laurel's vision of her parents resting together in dignified permanence under a big camellia tree is destroyed and replaced by the comic and temporal when Fay decides to bury the judge in the new part of the cemetery where "indestructible plastic Christmas poinsettias" (109) "mark the few new graves and the noise of the highway drowns out the burial ceremony" (Harrison 119-20).

Fay's disregard of the past makes her a major threat to Laurel's fixed memory of her parents. Laurel is enraged when she discovers that Fay cracked walnuts with a hammer on her mother's breadboard, an item that represented family memories. Scored, splintered and full of gouges, it is now a permanently defiled part of her past. By destroying Laurel's attempts to sustain memory and control of the past, Fay forces Laurel to release the past, reevaluate it and free herself to recreate her own origins, moving her "out of her state of living death toward a reawakened life" (Harrison 121). Fay's rejection of her own origins illustrates this potential for recreation. Abandoning her family in Madrid, she charts and plans her own future course. Her rootlessness enables her to remain a mysterious and enigmatic woman possessing the power of transformation. Hence, Fay's Otherness, for all its associations with oppression and inferiority, is no longer perceived as an oppressed, inferior condition. Rather, it is, as Tong proposes in Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction (1989), a way of being, thinking, and speaking that allows for openness, plurality, diversity, difference and transformation (219).

Throughout the novel, Fay's preoccupation is with herself. She considers her husband's optical injury trivial compared to the disappointments and neglect she faces. In response to the news of her husband's surgery, she complains, "I don't see why this had to happen to me" (8) and tells the Dalzells that "they went in my husband's eye without

consulting my feelings" (36). While waiting for the judge to be brought to his room after the operation, she exclaims, "What a way to keep his promise [. . .] [w]hen he told me he'd bring me to New Orleans some day [. . .] to see the Carnival" (12-13). Fay's intense self-love and self-centered attitude displays what Kofman in "The Narcissistic Woman: Freud and Girard" (1980) identifies as the traits of the "Narcissistic Woman". Kofman writes: "Strictly speaking, such women would love only themselves [and] would do so just as intensely as a man would love them. Their need does not make them aspire to love but to be loved, and they are pleased by a man who fulfils this condition" (Moi 211).

The narcissistic woman exerts great charm over men not only because she is attractive but also because of her ability to retain the original narcissism men have lost and for which they retain a stubborn nostalgia (Kofman 212). Such men have fully relinquished their own narcissism and are attracted to her because they are in quest of an object-love: "Men fantasize this type of woman as being the very 'essence' of woman, because she corresponds best despite her 'incongruity', to the desires of men, since she represents the lost part of their own narcissism, which has been projected so to speak onto the exterior" (Kofman 215).

The judge obviously lusted after Fay. Mount Salus found it hard to accept her "incongruity", but Hardy in "Marrying Down in Eudora Welty's Novels" (1979) points out that "it is manifestly absurd to suppose [. . .] that Fay entered the house uninvited, or changed anything in it to suit herself without her husband's approval" (118).

De Beauvoir in The Second Sex (1974) claims that narcissism in a woman follows from her Otherness. Frustrated as a subject because she is not allowed to engage in self-defining and fulfilling feminine activities, she is forced to find her reality in the

immanence of her person. Much of this fascination with herself as the object arises as she engages in an effort to assert a unique personality. Fascinated by and fixated on her own image (face, body and clothes), Fay's narcissism is helpful to her because she draws the courage to face challenges from the worship of her ego. Thus, the role of the narcissistic woman is a kind of masquerade that women choose to don to enable them to cope with patriarchal society.

Narcissistic women fascinate and are envied by men for knowing how to safeguard their independence, imperturbability and high self-esteem by repelling everything that devalues them. They attract because of their self-adulation which constitutes all ground for desire. Hence, what renders women like Fay enigmatic is no longer some "natural deficiency" or lack, which women have traditionally been made to believe, but adversely her affirmative narcissistic self-sufficiency and indifference (Kofman 212). Freud saw woman only in her negative aspects, as a "little man" without a penis, characterizing femininity as a lack by suppressing the notion of difference in gender relations. To him, woman was a reflection of man except in her sexuality. Female sexuality, because it does not mirror the male's, is an absence, or lack of, the male's (Tong 227). In the case of the narcissistic woman, it is no longer she who envies man for his penis but he who envies her for her inaccessible libidinal position. She knows how to keep her narcissism in reserve while he impoverishes and empties himself of this original narcissism to her advantage: "For if such a woman loves to be loved, she loves only herself, is sufficient in herself, and so leaves her lover unsatisfied. She always keeps 'an enigmatic reserve', gives herself without abandoning herself [. . .]" (Kofman 212). The judge therefore wastes away as Fay dotes on herself and does not return the love he gives. While he lived, Fay did "[n]othing

but sit-and-eat" (106). In Welty's works the act of eating is not simply an autonomous, neutral activity. Appetite and eating are points where power in gender relations is exercised since food is often enough used to symbolize sex in Welty's works.[1] Fay's preoccupation with food not only reflects her appetite for sex but also the sexual power she has over men. Her use of sex and sexual appeal is a weapon through which she controls, "ravishes" and "consumes" the judge. It is not surprising therefore that Clint McKelva dies feeling "worn out with [his wife]" (151).

In an attempt to contain the female, patriarchal culture has generated the idea of male libido as needing to protect itself against sexually motivated women. Welty however, challenges this idea of the female as passive victim, a definition which attributes libidinal desire only to males and associates the female with being merely the inert object of that desire. Welty shows that women must be seen equally as creatures of the flesh and as equally rooted in and driven by fleshly impulses. To deny women the same fleshly ontology as men would be to fall into the patriarchal syndrome of misrepresentation of women. In addressing this issue, Welty not only uses food but also animalistic imagery to signify a libido that has been culturally repressed in some women. According to Day in Angela Carter: The Rational Glass (1998), this libido needs to be recognized and articulated "in order that women may define autonomous subject positions for themselves" (147). Welty takes advantage of Koffman's comparison of the narcissistic woman as essentially "unpeaceful like a cat" (212) in order to illustrate Fay's violent sexual inclinations. Fay is said to bare "her claws at Laurel" (86) when she goes hysterical before her husband's coffin, prompting Fay's sister to warn, "[s]he bites" (86). This manifestation of wildness is essentially affirmative and is found in Dionysian animals like panthers and

tigers (which represent libido). It is also present in the bird of prey, the "Nietzschean" animal "par excellence" and symbol of affirmative force. While one might object here that these animals are more "virile" than "feminine", it can be surmised that women can be as "virile" as men (Kofman 212).

Playing the figurative role of the rapist, Fay takes on the masculine position in the narrative and becomes the subject instead of object of violence. Her "virility" and propensity towards sexual violence is manifested in her fierce attempt to awaken the judge in hospital. Seizing the judge, she forcefully shakes him to scare him into living. During the funeral, Fay runs "bursting from the hall into the parlor" (84) full of mourners and speaks to the judge in his coffin as if he were still alive. Breaking away wildly from those try to calm her, she weeps uncontrollably and throws herself upon the corpse. Fay violates the dead by "driving her lips without aim against the face under hers" (86) before being dragged away screaming out of the room. Fay's role and the symbolic meaning behind her violent aggression toward her husband is "more radical than has been recognized, since it inverts conventional female/male sexual roles" (Weston 165). Usurping the traditional male role as sexual aggressor by becoming the active sexual agent while her husband becomes the passive recipient, Fay reverses the "Freudian penis-as-positive, vagina-as-negative code" (165). Fay's unbridled sexuality is demonstrated through Welty's emphasis on her physicality. She is represented largely through references to her body: she points to her breastbone, drums her fists upon her temples, and tries to "la[y] hands" (32) on the dying Judge. Her brightly colored clothing draws attention to her physical appearance while her pink-satin bed is a loud reminder of her sexual nature. She possesses a sexuality absent in other women, demonstrating uncharacteristically frank sensuality in a female

character (Harrison 119). Fay's mourning and aggression toward the judge in his coffin violates and becomes a symbolic rape of the judge, codifying "her [. . .] as the penetrating aggressor" (Weston 165). Hence, Fay undoubtedly assumes the role as the "Robberbride" of The Optimist''s Daughter (Weston 165). Welty also introduces a female version of the prince who attempts to awaken Sleeping Beauty through Fay. Miss Tennyson points out the judge's inverted role by declaring that the judge is "lovely" (63) in his coffin. The relationship between Fay and the judge actually turns the tables on male objectification of the female when the Judge is described as an "attractive object" like a piece of art.

Fay possesses a vitality that is alluring although it is the vitality of the carnival. Without it, the novel would lack energy and force to propel Laurel into a self-examination of her experience. Fay is a woman committed to life (Weston 66). When Laurel asks why Fay "struck" the judge in his bed, Fay replies, "I was trying to scare him into living! [. . .] I was being a wife to him! [. . .] Have you clean forgotten by this time what being a wife is?" (175). Although Fay's view of marriage is crude, it is she, not Laurel, who breaks through Clint's deathlike trance by offering him a brief sensual experience. Neither Laurel's laborious vigil and reverent attendance upon her father nor her dutiful reading to him evoked as much response as the physical act of Fay's inserting her cigarette into his mouth. Fay comes closer to reaching him than Laurel does (Weston 166). What Fay has to offer beyond her sex appeal is vitality, spontaneity, and the desire to live fully in the moment, and Judge McKelva obviously seems to have been a man with great appetite for life. As Miss Adele remarks, "[Fay's] never done anybody any harm. [. . .] Rather, she gave a lonely man something to live for" (116).

However, Fay alone cannot bring about change. Instead of waking the judge, she puts him to sleep forever. Her efforts are merely catalytic actions (Weston 179). Despite her energy, the monstrous Fay is insufficient and incomplete. Fay, the self-proclaimed mysterious and progressive woman of the future is also superficial, shallow, petty, selfish and lacking in love and compassion; elements which are necessary not only for the development of encompassing womanhood but also for the nurturance of a healthy and balanced relationship with her husband. As Laurel discovers, "[i]t's not between the living and the dead, between the old wife and the new; it's between too much love and too little. There is no rivalry as bitter [. . .]" (152). While Becky, the judge's "good" wife gave him too much love, Fay's selfishness leads her to give too little. Hence, despite her violent attempt at reviving the judge, she is unable to save him. Alone, Fay represents only half of the split personality of the angel and the monster, which is a grotesque limitation of female personality (Weston 171).

Throughout the novel, Becky and Fay are seen as opposites. According to Miller in "Patterns of Nature and Confluence in Eudora Welty's The Optimist's Daughter" (1996), Welty uses nature to illustrate the oppositional states of their being and the tension of their dichotomous relationship. Early in the novel, Welty mentions two significant plants that parallel the two important female characters: a climbing rose and a fig tree (Miller 56). Becky, who loved and tended the garden flowers, found the climber her favorite. Laurel recalls Becky's favorite blouse as a "deep rich, American Beauty color," the color of a well-known rose by that name (Binding 255). The exquisite beauty, warm color and sweet scent of the rose suggest Becky's affiliation to the notion of ideal beauty, nature, nurture,

love and peace. In contrast to Becky's peaceful and nurturing qualities, Fay is petulant, chaotic, vulgar and destructive.

Since Becky's Climber represents her, the fig tree similarly becomes associated with Fay (Miller 56). Becky has carefully put bird frighteners on the fig tree to ward off birds from attacking the figs. Since figs indicate sexual pleasure in Welty[2], Becky's effort in protecting them suggests her desire to shield McKelva from too much sexuality. However, the figs (Fay) beckon to Judge McKelva and just as the reflectors cannot keep the birds from the figs in July, neither can Becky's American Beauty potency save her husband from Fay and her sensual lure.

The two plants are also associated with Judge McKelva's eye problem. As he prunes the roses, the Judge catches the flashes from the tin reflectors tied onto the fig tree. They disturb his vision and are the cause of his mistaking Becky's Climber for the fig tree. Miller points out that this is "the first moment of confluence in the novel" (56), the initial integration of dichotomy in female personality. It marks the moment where the "true American Beauty red" of Becky's "home-woven-and-sewn-blouse" begins to give way to the sexy and frivolous pink satin of Fay's bed covers (Vande Kieft 179).

Like the Judge, Laurel is caught between the climbing rose and the fig tree, and between Becky and Fay (56). Named after the state flower of West Virginia, Becky's hometown, Laurel keeps Becky's memory alive through her name and clings tightly to maternal bonds. However, memories of Becky's blindness and suffering during the last years of her life haunt Laurel and reveal something about her mother which she had not noticed before, that Becky is part of the same person that Fay is.

During her long descent into blindness and death, Becky undergoes a traumatic experience that results in a display of uncontrolled emotional outburst. In the midst of his wife's illness, Clint McKelva is unable to acknowledge her desperate situation, driving Becky into painful despair:

> [H]e seemed [. . .] particularly helpless to do anything for his wife. He was not passionately enough grieved at the change in her! He seemed to give the changes his same, kind recognition – to accept them because they had to be only of the time being, even to love them, even to laugh sometimes at their absurdity. [. . .][H]e apparently needed guidance in order to see the tragic. (145)

The Judge's inability "to see the tragic" suggests that he is not only physically but spiritually impaired as well (145). Refusing to recognize his wife's desperation and anger, he denies her the right to express herself honestly. His hopefulness contradicts Becky's actual mental and physical condition. Absorbing her angry reproaches, he uses forgiveness as a shield against all manifestations of her anger: "Whatever she [does] that she [cannot] help doing was all right. Whatever she was driven to say was all right" (150). When Becky desires to be brought back to the West Virginian mountains, he immediately promises to take her there. Laurel describes this offer as "the first worthless promise that ha[s] ever lain between them" (149). Welty explains that the judge "could not control [. . .] his belief that all his wife's troubles would turn out all right because there was nothing he would not have given her" (146). Judge McKelva's willingness to lavish everything on his wife implies that a man thinks what he has to offer a woman is sufficient for her happiness. Her need is thus perceived as stemming from a need for him and his benevolence. She does not exist as a being with separate desires that are apart from him or beyond his capacity to meet.

Laurel however realizes that "it [is] not all right!" (150). Becky needed her own individual feelings to be recognized for what they are: "Her trouble was that very desperation" (150). The judge's refusal to accept this stems from his fear of change. We are told that the judge, "in his domestic gentleness had a horror of any sort of private clash, of divergence from the affectionate and the real and the explainable and the recognizable. He was a man of great delicacy [. . .]. He grimaced with delicacy" (146).

Becky's attitude collides with what his masculine mind regards as rational, explicable, and predictable. Wishing her to remain the peaceful, loving woman he had always thought her to be, he rationalizes her outburst as a momentary show of absurdity and denies her any possibility of change, unpredictability or expression beyond the conventional representation of femininity with which he is comfortable. Refusing to acknowledge the existence of the hidden monster within her, he deceives himself and forces her aggressive nature to react more forcefully. Becky realizes her husband's inability to face not only her mortality but also more crucially her anger and hidden monstrosity. She considers this to be a form of betrayal and accuses him of being a coward and liar. Her dying "madness", diatribes and wild extravagance unavoidably transform her into a second, "bad", wife even before Fay appears (Weston 163). Hence, the passive angel inevitably dies and gives way to the monstrous woman who is undoubtedly stronger. Becky "[dies] without speaking a word, lonely and keeping everything to herself, in exile and humiliation" (151). Embittered and betrayed by those she loved, Becky came to believe "that she had been taken somewhere that was neither home nor up home, that she was left among strangers, for whom [. . .] anger meant nothing [and] on whom it would only be

wasted" (151). Laurel comes to realize that the Judge's refusal to acknowledge the truth of her final desperation constituted "betrayal on betrayal" (150).

Becky's final despair is in her premonition of her husband's marriage to Fay. "Fay was Becky's own dread" (174), and Becky sensed that Fay would arrive after her death: "[Becky] had suffered in life every symptom of having been betrayed, and it was not until she had died, and the protests of memory came due, that Fay had [. . .] tripped in from Madrid, Texas. It was not until that later moment, perhaps, that her father [. . .] had ever dreamed of Fay" (174). Laurel tells Fay that her mother predicted her appearance in the family: "Fay, my mother knew you'd get in her house. She never needed to be told [. . .]. She predicted you" (173). Laurel perceives that Fay "might have existed [as a ghostly, unrealized presence] in the house all the time" (174) and that "Fay could have walked in early as well as late, or at any time at all" (174).

Although intrinsically opposite, Fay and Becky are not "rivals", as Laurel comes to realize. Fay completes Becky by being her counterpart. Becky and Fay are like two rivers moving "toward the moment of confluence, each from a different direction. There is no past and future, because the existence of one presupposes the existence of the other: they must arrive together, in some convulsion of the mind" (Randisi 138). It is this understanding of confluence that enables Laurel to accept Fay's existence within her family. Laurel also begins to understand that Fay and Becky are each, in their own way, necessary to her father (Randisi 149). Becky's loving, nurturing qualities and Fay's sensual, playful nature are equally essential in marriage. Laurel must look beyond the simplistic view of marriage to an understanding of the complex, the combination of sustenance and sensual passion that characterizes the fuller view of marriage. The novel

avoids affirming one side of the binary opposition at the expense of the other. Rather, it maintains the awareness of both sides and the need to mediate between the two extremes (Harrison 110-33).

Throughout the novel, the theme of duality permeates. In its basic form, it is clearly seen in Welty's portrayal of Becky and Fay. The dichotomous relationship between Becky and Fay is not simply an explanation of stereotypical portrayals of women; rather, it is vital to our understanding of Laurel's predicament and is linked to how Laurel has been conditioned to think in terms of dualities regarding gender-related issues. Laurel's effort to reconcile the memory of Becky with her new relationship with Fay merely acts as a stepping stone towards reconciling larger dualistic ideas that Becky and Fay represent in Laurel's mind. Laurel's struggle is also to reconcile dualistic worlds: the domestic and modern life, home and work, the transcendent and immanent, the past and present. She battles against adopted masculine modes of thinking that compartmentalize life into either/or and masculine/feminine terms. Laurel's goal therefore is to find some kind of unity, integration and wholeness in the way she perceives the world and eventually herself.

The Becky/Fay dichotomy represents the categorizing of life into dualities. Becky represents all that is private, of home (Mount Salus), family and the ideal. Fay, in contrast, represents the city, work, progress ("I belong to the future") (179) and everything that is divorced from family life. She does not admit the existence of her family until they unexpectedly arrive for Judge McKelva's funeral (Westling 163). In short, the two women represent the oppositional states of work and home. According to Massey in "Blurring the Binaries?: High Tech in Cambridge" (1998), the boundary between work and home has

often been seen as an instantiation of the dualism between the male and female sphere, and of transcendence and immanence (161).

Transcendence has been identified as masculine (he who goes out and makes history) as against the female sphere of domesticity (she who merely "lives" and reproduces). Hence, work is seen as men's sphere in relation to transcendence, while the home is seen as women's sphere in relation to immanence. At work, the frontiers of history are pushed forward while at home there is the world of feelings, emotions and (simple) reproduction. Massey mentions Lloyd's argument that "Transcendence" in its origins is transcendence of the feminine. It is a male perspective that views what has been traditionally labeled as the feminine sphere as something to be transcended. Such thinking has been subjected to much criticism (Massey 161):

> Dualistic thinking has been criticized both in general as a mode of conceptualizing the world and in particular in its relation to gender and sexual politics. In general terms, dualistic thinking leads to the closing-off of options, and to the structuring of the world in terms of either/or. In relation to gender and sexuality it leads likewise to the construction of heterosexual opposites and to the reduction of genders and sexualities to two counterposed possibilities. Moreover, even when at first sight they may seem to have little to do with gender, many such dualisms are in fact thoroughly imbued with gender connotations, one side being socially characterized as masculine, the other as feminine, and the former being accordingly socially valorized. (Massey 161)

In many ways, Laurel resembles Fay. Both women have moved away from their mothers, venturing into professional lives far from the family home and abandoning

traditional domestic models of Southern womanhood. Laurel is an artist, a fabric designer. Like Fay, she is harshly judged for her self-exile from Mount Salus. The city, which she calls home, seems unreal and remote to her friends (Gretlund 189), and her decision to pursue her career results in her having to struggle with society's expectations of her that do not include a devotion to art and progress. All the older women try to persuade Laurel to give up her job in Chicago and assume her mother's role in the town: "Who's going to kill you if you don't draw those pictures? [. . .] [I]f Laurel would stay home [. . .] we could have as tough a bridge foursome as we had when Becky was playing" (113).

Bolsterli in "Woman's Vision: The Worlds of Women in Delta Wedding, Losing Battles and The Optimist's Daughter" (1979) records that ironically, when Laurel returns to her childhood home, she returns as an outsider and loses her standing in the Mount Salus community (154). Mrs. Pease says, "Once you leave [. . .] you'll always come back as a visitor [. . .]. Feel free of course – but it [is] always my opinion that people don't really want visitors" (112). Like Fay, Laurel is also consigned to the position of the Other and incarcerated by the community for not complying to their preference for the domestic. Interestingly, we find that it is the female community who vehemently objects to Laurel's present pursuits and incarcerates her. Laurel's predicament illustrates what Cixous in "Sorties" (1986) identifies as the greatest crime that patriarchy has committed against women, which has "[. . .] insidiously and violently [. . .] led [women] to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense power against themselves, to do the male's dirty work. They have committed an anti narcissism in her" (Cixous 68). Sharpe says that in day-to-day culture, it is women themselves, especially the majority who have

internalized this patriarchal outlook of "anti-narcissism", who accuse and sideline the unconventional or creative woman for witchcraft:

> We must reiterate that it was not just that the people accused of being witches were women; it was rather that [. . .] the whole business of deciding if an individual was a witch or [. . .] an individual act constituted witchcraft [. . .] seems overwhelmingly to have been a matter which operated [. . .] within the female sphere. (Sharpe 182)

Mount Salus's female community instills doubt in Laurel regarding her new position as a modern working woman. She is pressured to valorize the domestic and to regard Fay and Fay's domestic incompetence as disgraceful. Laurel's initial rejection of Fay and intense devotion to her mother's memory shows how she vacillates from embracing modern city life to valorizing the town's traditions. After the judge's death, Laurel reaches back desperately for memories of her mother. Once, left alone in the house after her father's funeral, Laurel retreats into Becky's sewing room. She recalls how, in her childhood days, she had sat beside Becky, assembling her fallen scraps of cloth and creating her own patterns. Her experience in the sewing room not only represents the recollection of memories of her mother but also symbolizes her subconscious reclaim of the domestic world in which she was brought up:

> It was the sewing-room, all dark; she had to feel about for a lamp. She turned it on [. . .]. By its light she saw that here was where her mother's secretary had been exiled. [. . .] Firelight and warmth-that was what her memory gave her. Where the secretary was now there had been her small bed, with its railed sides that could be raised as tall as she was when she stood up in bed, arms up to be lifted out. The

> sewing machine was still in place under the single window. When her mother [. . .] sat here in her chair pedaling and whirring, Laurel sat on this floor and put together the fallen scraps of cloth into stars, flowers, birds, people, or whatever she liked to call them, lining them up, spacing them out, making them into patterns, families, on the sweet-smelling matting, with the shine of firelight, or the summer light, moving over mother and child and what they were both making. (132-34)

The sewing room scene stages a memory of patchwork-in-progress, representative of her mourning experience as an act of remembrance of her relationship with her mother. According to Chouard in "Sew to Speak: Text and Textile in Eudora Welty" (2003), the scene illustrates a link between the restorative process of quilting with the experience of mourning. The pieces of cloth Laurel made patterns with as a child appear as objects of transference, a metaphoric substitute for her mother's body. As she remembers her patchwork attempts, she learns how to reattach herself to the mother (mater) figure and the domestic setting for which she stands. Laurel reappropriates her mother in order to restore her memory and create a viable bridge to her mother's world (Chouard 9). As a child, Laurel was part of the world of mothers and daughters, made up of a "self-contained, sufficient world of sewing rooms, gardens" and "family" (Prenshaw, Woman's World 69). Welty shows us that although Laurel shares a similar "wandering" experience as Fay, she has never denied her mother's values or entirely rejected the traditions of the Mount Salus community.

Gretlund notes that although the novel records three full weeks of action, most of the time in New Orleans during the Mardi Gras Carnival, the novel is psychologically never of the city. Scenes of small-town life in Mounts Salus dominate The Optimist's

Daughter (Gretlund 189). Although Laurel has physically left Mount Salus for the city life of progress and work, psychologically she still clings to Mount Salus and all it stands for. This would appear contradictory since Laurel's attempt at retreat from the city prevents her from acknowledging her desires and love for work (Eichelberger 153). How does she resolve this tension of wanting to face the future and experience progress in the city without denying her strong attachments to family memories and Mount Salus's traditional community? Welty fully acknowledges this complex gap that exists between the contemporary woman who wants to define herself and the woman caught in built-in definitions of family consciousness without resorting to simplistic resolutions (Weston 170).

Laurel's epiphanic moment comes during the breadboard scene. Fay in her disregard for domestic pieties destroys Becky's breadboard by defacing it, permanently shattering the tangible object that has become the center of value and symbol of domestic heritage in the McKelva home. Her act symbolically breaks the remains of Laurel's attachment to and worship of her family ties and traditions that insulate her from change. Following this, Laurel begins to realize that the McKelva House, which is full of family memories, must cease to be a shrine that imprisons her. She senses her need to move from the sphere of immanence into a more dynamic, creative relationship with the future. Although memories of her experiences at the McKelva home are inextricably linked to the present, her relationship with Mount Salus must not inhibit her from continuing to pursue the future. The freedom that Laurel experiences psychologically from this illumination is illustrated by her freeing a frightened chimney swift (representative of the conflict in her own mind) that was trapped in the sewing room.

While a woman should not be pressured to conform to domestic preferences, Welty also seems to say that women should not valorize the city and belittle or discard the domestic. Both experiences at work and home are equally valuable and deserve equal recognition. Laurel does not shake off all her experiences in Mount Salus and leave for Chicago without them. She learns that she has to rediscover her hometown again to enrich her present experiences. The difference is that Laurel's life will henceforth be enriched by both the city and the domestic and not ordered by them.

The experience of the domestic also provides material for Laurel's present experience as an artist. What Laurel finally creates, "raise[s] up [with] her own hands" is an experience of the domestic life now remembered, revived, rediscovered, and repossessed (154). She gains a new sense of the continuity of self, which is "a confluence of what was, now remembered and rediscovered, and what is, now discovered" (Gretlund 205). In this way, Welty gives a positive answer to the despairing question about the modern working woman's capability to overcome emotional stuntedness by reviving and repossessing the traditional experience of the domestic. Therefore, what Laurel creates is a new experience, a new self that does not compartmentalize experiences, but embraces the dualities of life.

Laurel's journey is one of self-discovery where her self-renewal is accomplished by realizing that the tensions of human experience can be resolved through the confluence of oppositional states. She breaks free from confining patriarchal perceptions that not only dichotomize women, but life in general, making it possible for the creation of an authentic self and fuller life. Completing the image of confluence, Laurel is Welty's resolution of those divergent streams, as she discovers the doubleness of female experience and in doing so, uncovers a deeper and more integral design of wholeness.

NOTES

[1] See Virgie Rainey's preoccupation with food in Chapter 3, "The Golden Apples: Redefining the Hero".

[2] Welty's portrayal of Virgie biting into ripe figs (symbolic of sex and sexual knowledge) represents her direct engagement in and enjoyment of sex.